DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 069 560 SO 000 855

AUTHOR	Seifman, Eli
TITLE	"The Panama Canal Episode: An Encounter with a Question and Answers." Occasional Paper 3.
INSTITUTION	State Univ. of New York, Stony Brook. American Historical Association Education Project.
PUB DATE	71
NOTE	5p.
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Classroom Communication; *Questioning Techniques; *Social Studies; Student Teacher Relationship; Student Teachers; Teaching Styles; *Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

This is an account of the experience of a college instructor and a group of prospective social studies teachers as they answer a simple question concerned with direction of travel through the Panama Canal and explore the reactions of students. The situation originates in a class discussion focusing on ways of asking and responding to classroom questions. The hypothesis of the instructor is that in the broad field of social studies it is probably impossible for a teacher to answer all questions that students might ask, and that it might not be advisable to always answer all student questions even when the answer is known. The students view this theory as anti-intellectual. Reaction sheets are completed by the students following the instructor's experiment in classroom question and answer techniques. (SHM)

ED 069560

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPY RIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Eli Seifman
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE US OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

"The Panama Canal Episode: An Encounter With A Question and Answers"

Eli Seifman

American Historical Association History Education Project

Occasional Paper No. 3

State University of New York at Stony Brook

1971

Copyright 1971

FILMED FROM BEST AVAILABLE COPY

SP 000 855

Sometimes teachers have an opportunity, or make one, to play with an idea. This brief paper reports the experience of a college instructor and a group of prospective social studies teachers (at the State University of New York at Stony Brook) as they play with a single simple question and explore their reactions to the encounter.

The situation had its origins in a class discussion focusing on ways of asking and responding to classroom questions. The predominent opinion of the prospective teachers is summed up in this statement by one of the class members: "You can't let a student think you don't know the answer to a question, otherwise you'll lose face with the class."

The instructor suggested that social studies as a field of knowledge was so wide that it was probably impossible for a teacher to know the answer to all questions that students might ask, and added that it might not even be advisable to always answer all student questions even when one knew the answer. The group was not at all impressed with this position. Indeed they viewed the supposition as anti-intellectual and dismissed the instructor's hypothesis, claiming "That's just the kind of comment we'd expect from an <u>educationist</u>. A good teacher knows his field and knows the facts---that's why he's the teacher!"

The instructor, now somewhat on the defensive, challenged the group to put this to the test. "How?" they asked. "Well, by taking a question that we think a social studies teacher should know the answer to and seeing if we can answer it. O.K.?" "O.K.," they replied.

Thus it began. The instructor asked the class the following question: "If you are in a ship going through the Panama Canal, on your way from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, in what direction do you travel?" A tally of the answers was placed on the chalkboard. Ten

students said Northeast to Southwest (i.e. ↙); three said East to West (i.e. ←); one said Southeast to Northwest (i.e. ↖); and the rest (eight students) refused to divulge their answer. "What's the correct answer?" a student asked. Instead of answering the question the instructor merely smiled, first at the student who asked the question and then more widely at the class in general.

Intrigued by the diversity of the responses and the fact that not a single answer was "correct" the instructor decided to pursue the matter. The next class session began with the instructor distributing to each student a Xerox copy of a map of the Caribbean area and a detailed map of the Panama Canal Zone (see Figure 1). Two students "interrupted"

Figure 1

to say that they had looked it up; and also commented that nobody had given the "correct" answer last time. One of these students, curious about what the others had done, asked if anyone else had looked it up. No one else had, and he seemed rather surprised.

The class was then given a reaction sheet on the "Panama Canal Episode" and asked to respond to the following question: "What questions (if any) would you like to raise relative to this episode?" The responses to this question generated a number of topics and issues that the class found interesting enough to absorb them for the next several class sessions. Listed below is a tally of these questions collated from the students' reaction sheets.

Summary of Student Questions About the Panama Canal Episode

Frequency	Question
4	Why do some people remain silent? (What factors inhibited participation?)
3	Why were there so many different answers?
3	Why were there so many wrong answers? (Why didn't anybody know the answer to such a comparatively easy question?)
2	Is question challenging enough to stimulate individual initiative?
2	Why didn't more people seek outside sources for an answer?
1	Will this method (not providing the answer) inspire initiative?
1	Why ask such an inconsequential question?
1	Why didn't students admit to not knowing the answer instead of picking one of the choices?
1	How important was the whole issue? (Was it worth finding out?)
1	Did teacher's action (refusal to answer) increase interest?
1	What techniques could have been used to increase student initiative to delve into problems on their own?
1	Does waiting until next session to reveal answer increase retention of information?

Frequency	Question
1	What made the majority choose NE to SW?
1	Why didn't students admit to not knowing the answer instead of picking one of the choices?
1	If class had been asked to submit answers on paper, would all students have answered rather than having some refuse to answer?
1	Is this an effective method?
1	Did students try to find answers themselves?
1	Was there any purpose in refusing to disclose the answer other than to test the reaction of class to such a refusal?
1	Would it have been better for teacher to make an assignment that people look it up?
1	How come more interest was not generated into the subject and matters pertaining to it?
1	What relation is there between ability to answer a question and willingness to answer the question?
1	What would be the results of episode had teacher explained answer?

The instructor could have "solved" the problem by answering the student's question as to which was the correct answer---the teacher did know the "answer." Instead, however, he chose to play with the idea of exploring the consequences of deliberately refusing to provide the "correct answer"---a decision he has not regretted.